


City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: JUNE 27, 2005

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER 

SUBJECT: STATUS REPORT ON USE OF THE BISHOP IRETON HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETIC FIELD

ISSUE: Neighbor's concerns that the Bishop Ireton High School athletic field is being used for non school related activities and that there is an intensification of the use of the field.

RECOMMENDATION: That Council receive this status report. Staff has made a determination regarding the athletic field and intensification of its use and has advised the school that certain activities must cease immediately.

DISCUSSION: Neighbors of Bishop Ireton (BI) High School have communicated to Council and staff their concerns about the increased activity at the BI athletic field after the school installed artificial turf in the summer of 2003. Although Planning and Zoning staff determined that there is no zoning or special use permit violation, it has been working extensively with the school, with the Clover-College Park Citizens Association, residents of the area, with other staff and with input from Councilman Gaines to resolve a series of school and neighborhood issues.

Citizen Concerns

In response to complaints from neighbors immediately adjacent to the Bishop Ireton (BI) athletic field, in March 2005, Planning and Zoning Department staff met with a group of neighbors, a representative of the Clover-College Park Citizens Association, and Councilman Gaines. Neighbors related a series of problems with the use of the athletic field, including the following:

- There was activity during the week and on weekends from dawn to dusk, even during the summer when school was not in session;
- Many non-school related events occurred on the field since the field is now suitable for all-weather play;

- BI was allowing the athletic field to be used for commercial purposes because, in some cases, teams from out of state were competing with one another on the field on the weekend and during the week;
- There were plans to use the field this summer for summer sports camps and leagues, which had not been offered in past years by the school;
- BI had failed to create a neighborhood relations committee as required by condition #43 of BI's 1995 SUP;

The immediate neighbors said that they had no problem with BI school activities on the field, including school physical education, team practice, and school games. They did list several additional issues which they believed were a result of the increase in field activity, including:

- The use of the school's exterior public address system for music and play-by-play announcements during non school events;
- The accumulation of trash and litter along the perimeter of the school's property facing the neighbors' lots;
- The parking of out-of-state vehicles on the neighborhood streets;
- Public urination in the northeast corner of the of the school property near the neighbor's homes;
- The outdoor storage of equipment; and
- The proposed relocation of a baseball batting cage closer to the neighbors' homes.

Zoning and SUP Issues

There are two active BI SUPs. In 1962, Council approved SUP #504, which allowed the construction of the school. It contains very few conditions and all of them relate to the original construction of the school. In 1995, Council approved SUP # 95-0093, allowing the construction of an auditorium and additional classrooms as well as additional off-street parking. **Neither SUP includes any condition that addresses the use or operation of the athletic fields.**

The 1995 SUP does contain a condition requiring BI to establish and maintain a neighborhood relations committee made up of students, parents of students, school officials, and neighbors. P&Z staff determined that this committee had not been established.

P&Z staff also determined that while there is no express condition in the SUP with regard to the fields, the City does have authority under the zoning ordinance and the SUP to review and limit the scope of the schools activities in certain cases:

1. Non-school uses.

If there are non-school related sports activities occurring on the athletic field, the use of the field may no longer be an accessory use to the private school and would not be permitted. It is understood that, in addition to the primary education function, private schools may also have

special functions and athletic events that occur from time to time that are related to their education purpose. Special dances, family dinners, social events, fund-raising events, and athletic competitions are accessory to the education mission of the school when they involve students, families of students, prospective students or friends and associates of the school. However, when school facilities, such as the athletic field, are used as a commercial money-making enterprise and become a magnet for non-school related sports events, especially adult sports leagues and sport competitions that do not involve school students and the mission of the school, they are no longer accessory to the school, but become a commercial use which is not permitted in a residential area.

2. Intensification.

When an SUP is approved, there is an expectation, based on the information presented in the application and at the hearing, regarding the level of activity that will be associated with the SUP. If there is evidence that the level of activity has increased above that which was reasonably envisioned in the approval of the SUP, then there is an intensification of the use which, under Section 11-509 of the zoning ordinance, requires approval of a new SUP.

City Determination and Resolution of Neighborhood Issues

P&Z staff had a series of meetings with BI officials, neighbors, and representatives of the Clover-College Park Civic Association during April, May, and June to try to work out a way that the school can use the field for legitimate school related activities and, at the same time, not unduly impact the immediate neighbors. The process has been necessarily slow and time consuming because part of the effort is to begin to restore a level of trust between the school and the neighbors.

From staff's initial meeting with the school, BI has expressed its strong wish to cooperate with its neighbors. Staff has found most residents in the area, including representatives of the Clover-College Park Civic Association, are in general agreement with the direction of the discussion and the City determinations. A few immediate neighbors remain unsatisfied with the degree to which the school's operations have been curtailed. The following determinations have been made:

Neighborhood Relations Committee. BI has begun this committee, as required by the SUP, and held a few initial meetings with neighbors, including one facilitated by Jim Butler, the President of the Clover-College Park Civic Association. All parties agree that if the Neighborhood Relations Committee had been meeting over the last few years, the issues experienced this spring could have been avoided. Additional work needs to be done to ensure the committee as envisioned by the SUP becomes a permanent, on going effort that fosters understanding between the school and its neighbors, and staff will monitor the situation in the future as part of its SUP enforcement work.

Non-school use of the fields. School officials acknowledge that with the installation of the new artificial turf, they had approved its increased use without realizing that only school related activities were allowed to occur on the field. BI agreed to curtail all non-school use of the field at the end of its then existing commitment through the end of May 2005. The Alexandria Soccer

Association would like to use the field, as part of the City's programming of fields, in direct exchange for BI's taking several of the school's activities to other City facilities.

Summer use of field. BI had planned extensive use of the athletic field over the summer, including by summer sports camps and sports' leagues, and maintains that all of these camps and leagues are school related and consistent with the types of activities that other private schools schedule during the summer. Planning staff has reviewed the plans for field use this summer within the context of its operation as a private school under the 1962 and 1995 SUP and determined:

- The four weekday morning sports camps for students and prospective students are acceptable as accessory and within normal bounds of school athletic activity.
- The Men's Lacrosse League games (scheduled for late afternoon/evening) and the Women's Lacrosse Camp (Sunday) are an intensification of the use of the field and may not be held this summer on the school's field. BI agreed, and the activities are being held at other athletic fields in the City.

Planning staff has determined that the above level of activity is consistent with the school use and BI's SUPs.

Additional Limitations

In an attempt to lower the level of activity on the field and reduce the noise level, BI has agreed to the following:

- Not to use the field on Sundays, except for occasional school team practice and school special events.
- Not to use the field on the following holidays: New Year's Day, Easter Sunday, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.
- To limit the use of the field public address system to 15 minutes at the start of school soccer and lacrosse varsity games. However, the school will still use the public address system for announcements and play-by-play for the five scheduled home varsity football games on Saturday afternoons.
- Whistles will be used during non-league lacrosse games rather than air horns to signify the end of the quarters.

Hours of Operation. The school understands that they should only be using the athletic field for school related activities: physical education during the school day, school team practice, and school games. However, they want the flexibility to be able to schedule these activities during agreed upon hours of operation of the field. The neighbors agree. However, what those hours should be still needs to be worked out. P&Z staff is working with the school and neighbors to define these hours.

Other Issues. There are remaining issues that still need to be worked on by the school.

- Parking problems in the neighborhood. The school will be working to require field participants and spectators to use the parking area in the front of the school.
- Trash in the field area and around the school perimeter. This is also an SUP condition. School officials say that they have become more vigilant about this problem over the past several months.
- The school should consider the planting of additional trees and shrubs to screen the field from view by the neighbors.
- They will improve communications with the immediate neighbors and surrounding neighborhood through the Neighborhood Relations Committee, as well as through other means.

Conclusion

Working with neighbors, school officials and the civic association, Planning staff intends to monitor the progress of the Neighborhood Relations Committee to ensure that neighborhood issues are addressed.

STAFF:

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